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IX.—*A Dissertation on White Elephants.—By Captain JAMES LOW,
Cor. Mem. R. A.S.*

Read February 19, 1831.

THE existence of perfectly white elephants has been called in question by many; and it was long supposed that the kings of Siam imposed on the credulity of foreigners, and that the light colour of the elephant was artificial. No doubt can now remain respecting the existence of this deviation from the common course of nature. In the stables of the king of Siam there are elephants, the colour of which, although not pure white, is yet sufficiently light-coloured to admit of the appellation they have received being with propriety bestowed upon them. Strangers at Siam are taken to see these elephants, and no mystery is made respecting them.*

I am not aware that any elephants of a colour even approaching to white have been discovered in Hindustan.

Although we have every reason for supposing that the white elephants are *not* of a distinct species, yet there is nothing which, physically considered, ought to weigh against such a supposition, and there is much which analogy might bring to its support; particularly as we know that the variety in the colour of perhaps all domesticated animals has been owing to the care and art of man, and that he has the power thereafter of causing any one colour to be perpetuated in preference to another.

In the Indian Archipelago there is the white buffalo, or *Kurbaū putih*, which is a very powerful animal. Its colour is a dingy white, or white and

* Mr. Crawfurd, in his Mission to Siam, describes having seen six of these in the king's stables, a larger number than were ever before collected there. "They approached much nearer to a true white colour than I had expected; they had indeed all of them more or less of a flesh-coloured tinge, but this arose from the exposure of the skin, owing to the small quantity of hair with which the elephant is naturally covered. They showed no signs of disease, debility, or imperfection; they were of the ordinary stature." P. 96. "The rareness of the white elephant is no doubt the origin of the consideration in which it is held." P. 97. They have also a white monkey.

red mixed. It is of a distinct species from the black buffalo. The Malays do not relish its flesh, although not apparently differing from that of the other, and say it is unwholesome.*

From inquiries made amongst the Siamese, I find that they are not aware, and indeed do not believe, that a herd of white elephants has ever been met with. Those which, at wide intervals of time, their hunters have secured in Cambaya and Laos, are termed by them *Pjhriya pho-ak chang*, or "kings of herds;" because found singly amid herds of the common black elephant, or *chang dam*. In 1823 one of the white elephants in the king's stable was a female.

The curiosity as well as the cupidity of the Siamese would have led them to an endeavour at rearing a variety in such high request amongst themselves and several Indo-Chinese nations, had not their religion opposed an insuperable obstacle. As these white elephants are sacred, the Siamese believe that dreadful calamities would overtake their country, were they to allow the males to copulate with the females.

That the elephant will breed in a domestic state is now sufficiently ascertained, and it is only surprising that it was not so very long since. The Quidah people, in the neighbourhood of Prince of Wales' Island, are in the habit of keeping brood elephants, and find no difficulty in rearing the young.

The Siamese informed me that one of their male white elephants came from *Phokhiau*, a mountain in South Laos; another from *Matta bang*, a term applied by the Siamese to part of Cambaya; and a third came from *Che-ung Mai*, in North Laos.

The exceeding degree of veneration in which the Siamese hold the white elephant will be best explained by my giving an account of their treatment

* Mr. Kendall, in the 87th No. of the Asiatic Journal, in treating of the true history of the wild sheep, has made some remarks which may be applied to this subject. He observes, that in every species of animal of which the usual colour is *not* white, nature occasionally presents us with white specimens; thus we have white oxen, white deer, white ravens, and white sparrows, &c.; and even amongst the human species Albinos and white negroes.

This occasional whiteness produced in a state of nature is the result of a faulty constitution of the individual animal.

In so far as respects the white buffalo we cannot apply Mr. Kendall's remarks, but they may with propriety be considered applicable to the white elephant, until facts shall be adduced to establish it as a distinct species.

of that one which was brought from Cambaya, which I circumstantially took down from the mouths of well-informed natives of *Bangkōk*.

This elephant was met on its journey to the capital by a deputation of Siamese courtiers, sent by the king to congratulate him on his entry into his majesty's dominions. He was then greeted by a deputation of worthies from the town *Dan Houlaman*. The next stage was *Sala K̄hru*; then *P̄hihang D̄ing*, where the governor, or *P̄hriā*, of *K̄hannayōk*, paid a congratulatory visit; next *Dan Moo-ring Thién* to *Nā lung*; thence to *Bā p̄hong*, where the governor of *Yuthīa* paid his humble respects; thereafter to *Sāmk̄hōk*; next *Mu ring Nou*; and then to *Wat k̄hang k̄hāu*, or the “*Flying Fox Monastery*.”—Here the king of Siam came to meet the sacred animal. The expression of the Siamese on this and similar occasions is, *Phreea cha det cha song P̄hra tamnoon t̄hääng P̄hra chonna mak rap P̄lreea Baromma chakt̄han*.

From this it is evident that the king deems himself inferior in degree to this elephant; and we are further furnished with another reason for the existence of this whimsical superstition. *P̄hreea Baromma chakt̄han* was, the Siamese say, a king of *CHET UDĀN*.

But to proceed, the sacred elephant was taken from *Wat k̄hang k̄hāu*, and conducted by the king to his capital of *Bangkōk*; a splendid festival was then proclaimed to be held in the open air near the palace.

This festival of the white elephant happens only when one is newly caught. There is a regular day or period set apart every three months at which he receives the attentions of the pious.

The high priests attend to regulate the ceremonies and recitations from the Bali books appropriated and suited to the occasion. Prayers are offered up for a long life to this *elephant king*, the priests all the while sprinkling holy water over his body.

When a newly-caught elephant reaches the capital he is consecrated by the priests, and then has a stall prepared for his reception in the *Chang Rung*, or elephant stable; where, except when taken out for exercise, or to lead processions, he lives the remainder of his life on the *contributions* levied by the king for his support.*

* M. De la Loubere has only casually alluded to the white elephant, by observing that the king never rides upon it, because its rank is equal to his own. Kœmpfer makes no mention of the white elephant.

P̄hra Sowat, a king of *Ulum pancha*, dreamed that a flower of the lotus fell into his hand.

The fortunate hunter who caught the animal is permitted to draw out a certain portion for himself of money from each of two heaps, the one of gold the other of silver.

In a drawing in my possession of the Chinese *quinary* assemblage of deities, one of them is depicted as riding on a white elephant.*

Amongst the seven precious things which belonged to BAROMMACHAK, or ЧАККАРПАТТА, was (according to the *Bali Milinda*) the famous *diamond elephant*, whose lineage may be traced from the *Chattjan*, king of elephants. The Solar race had the appellation of "lords of the forest," meaning elephants, in contradistinction to the Lunar race, or "crocodiles," "lords of the waters;" and, at the death of AMENON, the sovereignty of the world is figuratively said to have passed from the crocodiles to the elephants, A.M. 1204.

SESONCHORIS, or SESOSTRIS, who was chief of the elephants, and son of AMANEMES, conquered the world. And MANETHON says, that the fifth Egyptian dynasty was of elephant kings.†

It may not seem here out of place if a few remarks are made regarding

Next day the soothsayer told him that he must go to a distant forest to search for a princess called PRATHOM. He set off on a flying Pegasus, and met with the princess; and was married to her by a *Rishi*, her father. The happy couple were next day walking in the forest, when a *Phran* or Bowman (huntsman) of the Raja killed PHRA SOWAT, and carried off his wife. The *Rishi* found the body, which he restored to life, by anointing it with holy oil. The Raja then went in quest of his wife, carrying with him some of the oil. He found a white elephant which had just been killed in a rencontre with a black one: and anointing the body restored it to life; and it then obtained the victory, and regained its attendants from the black one. The Raja then mounted the white elephant, and proceeded to the temple *Wiman nam krot*.

According to Maurice, armies of elephants (or men riding on elephants) mark the progress of CRISHNA through the Thebaid and *Ethiopia*. And from the late Colonel Wilford's learned Essays we find, that a river of *Sanka Dwipa* (supposed by him to mean Egypt) flowed from the temples of a huge white elephant. CRISHNA slew him after a combat of six days, and a beautiful *Yaksha* sprung from the decapitated trunk.

* Sir W. Jones describes the eight gods, who guard the eight quarters of the world, as borne on elephants. The elephant's head, or mouth, gives birth to one of the great rivers of Hindustan.

In the Asiatic Researches also, we find it stated that VISWA DHANVA, son of KAMADEVA, saw in the *Himala* a white elephant of great size, having four tusks, which he chased to the burning sands of *Barbara*, and there slew; when a beautiful youth sprung from the mangled body, after having first assumed the appearance of a gigantic *Racshasa*. (*Vide* Asiatic Researches, vol. iii.)

† Key to Hindoo Chronology.

the Albinos, which are found among the nations of this quarter of Asia. I had the opportunity of seeing on the island of Pinang, or Prince of Wales' Island, a Malay of this description. *Albinos* are to be met with in Siam, Pegu, and Patani, and, in all probability, over the whole of these countries. The Siamese term them, *Khon phu-uk*, i. e. "white people;" and look upon them much in the same light as we do, considering the cause of the peculiarity to be in a defective organization.

MUHAMMED TAHIR, the Malay alluded to, paid me a visit at my request, and readily replied to the questions put to him. His conversation betrayed no imbecility of intellect; while a stout-built frame, and stature of five feet six inches, shewed that colour with him was not a source of bodily weakness. He is about forty years of age, and was born in the principality of Quidah, or *Keddah*. His skin much resembles that of a red-haired and florid European. The proportion of the red mixed with the white is rather the largest, so that, except from the Malayan features and dress, any one unacquainted with the circumstances might easily mistake him for an inhabitant of the northern climates of Europe.

He has, however, the defect which seems to attend the Albinos in other regions, for he is short-sighted, and has weak bluish eyes. The hair both on his head and body is of a silvery white.

He described himself to be one of a large family, and two of his sisters to be Albinos. He is married, and has children of the common Malayan complexion. He follows the profession of a schoolmaster.
